

Australian Liberals campaign launch: A “make-over” of Abbott and policy cover-up

Nick Beams
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The Australian election campaign, which the Socialist Equality Party has rightly characterised as a travesty of democracy as the major parties and the media seek to bury the essential issues, plunged to new lows yesterday with the Liberal-National Party policy launch in Brisbane.

The launch was designed to provide a make-over of Abbott, one of the most right-wing figures in the Australian political establishment, in order to present him as a suitable prime minister.

In a reprise of the 2004 re-election campaign of US president George W. Bush, and using some of the same ploys, Abbott’s two daughters were on hand to present the image of their father as a “netball dad.”

Such is the widespread hostility to the Labor government, that the Liberals’ election strategy consists of nothing more than presenting the election of a coalition government as some kind of return to normalcy—a government the electorate can “trust”—while covering up the real policy agenda being demanded by the financial and corporate elites as soon as the election is out of the way.

Abbott seeks to conjure up an image of the days of former Prime Minister John Howard when the government’s fiscal agenda often centred on little more than announcing personal tax cuts for the wealthiest layers of society to redistribute increased corporate tax revenue flowing from the China-fueled minerals boom up the income scale.

The real agenda of whatever government takes power after September 7—and at this point it seems almost certain to be the Liberals—was laid out almost 18 months ago by Liberal treasury spokesman Joe Hockey, when, he called for an end to the “age of entitlement”, that is, the destruction of the system of social services put in place after World War II.

Hockey put his speech back into his brief case after delivering it, claiming that it did not apply to Australia when questioned about what services and facilities should be scrapped. But it remains the basis of the program being demanded by the ruling elites.

Abbott tried to accommodate those demands, claiming that a Liberal government would set in place a 10-year plan to bring the budget to a 1 percent surplus of gross domestic product and promising that “each year government will be a smaller percentage of our economy.”

While the press coverage of Abbott’s speech was extremely favourable, there were some criticisms in the editorial columns. The *Australian Financial Review* insisted that the post-Labor budget problem was “bigger than Mr Abbott’s homily to Australian voters suggests.” The sweeping measures introduced under the Hawke-Keating government, which saw the slashing of corporate tax rates and the introduction of a “free market” agenda, were not the result of “incremental changes or no policy surprises”—a reference to commitments made by Abbott in the course of his speech—but was the outcome of something “close to a revolution in Australia’s policy status quo ... a revolution that the conservative prime minister of the 1970s, Malcolm Fraser failed to grasp.”

The editorial made clear where the next targets of the “revolution”, more accurately social counter-revolution, lay. Workplace culture and institutions had to be “recast” and a “productivity rebound”—the code phrase for wage cutting and deeper attacks on conditions such as those being carried out at GMH—initiated in response to a fall in commodity prices from their record highs.

“And extending the 1980s and ’90s pro-market reform agenda to areas such as the health system is

more critical given the lack of progress to date and its relentless call on the public purse,” it continued.

There is considerable criticism in ruling circles, reflected in the commentary in the main media outlets, that some of the major policy commitments of the Liberals are at odds with the demand for “smaller” government.

The *Australian* noted in an editorial that the Liberals paid parental leave scheme, to be financed at least in part by a tax levy on the 3,000 largest companies, was at odds with Hockey’s “predisposition” to end the “culture of entitlement.”

It was also critical of the Liberals’ commitment to make good on Labor’s education and disability programs as well as their so-called “direct action” plan on carbon emissions as more expensive than an emissions trading system. Together with the restoration of the health insurance rebate, repealed under Labor, and the commitment to boost defence spending “this is a big spending agenda clothed in small government rhetoric.”

To achieve all of the Liberals’ aims on spending and budget consolidations, the editorial continued, would “take something of a fiscal miracle.”

Key sections of the ruling elites, however, are not relying on divine intervention, let alone some upswing in the Australian economy. Their strategy appears at this stage to be to secure the return of an Abbott government with a sizeable majority. This would then be followed by a major policy reorientation through the audit of government and the tax reviews proposed by the Liberals immediately on coming into office.

If Abbott proves unwilling or unable to implement the program being demanded then a campaign is certain to be launched to replace him. Malcolm Turnbull, who has close ties with business and financial circles, has been waiting in the wings since Abbott deposed him as Liberal leader in 2009.

The driving forces that will determine the program of whatever government comes to power lie neither in campaign promises nor within the national arena. Rather, they are to be found in the worsening state of the global economy and the international financial system. The plunge in the Indian rupee over the past weeks, coupled with the sharp falls in equity and currency markets in Indonesia and Thailand, are clear warnings that the next stage of the global capitalist

breakdown that began in 2008 could be a financial crisis across Asia as billions of dollars in speculative finance capital are withdrawn.

Coming on top of the ending of the China boom, such a crisis would immediately engulf the Australian economy which has grown ever more dependent on Asian markets.

This deepening global economic crisis, which the major parties are desperately seeking to cover over, will give rise to decisive social and class struggles for which the working class must now prepare.

The necessary political program on which the working class must base itself in these struggles will be the focal point of the final election campaign meetings conducted by the Socialist Equality Party, starting in Melbourne and Sydney next Saturday and Sunday.

Authorised by Nick Beams, 113/55 Flemington Rd, North Melbourne VIC 3051



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